

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee. My name is Dr. Danielle Wozniak, I am a professor of Social Work at the University of Montana.

For the last two years Masters of Social Work students in my Advanced Social Policy class have been collecting data from Montanans on issues that surface when a family has a Guardian ad Litem.

Our involvement began when several parents told us their stories. Their experiences were emblematic of a broken system in desperate need of repair. They told about losing custody to an abusive spouse, about financial ruin as they struggled to pay seemingly limitless fees, and about helplessly watching their GAL attempt to navigate complicated family relations and histories with little or no expertise.

To understand the nature and scope of the problem, these graduate students, under my supervision, collected data from around the state.

1. They conducted face-to-face interviews with parents, attorneys, guardians, mental health professionals, county clerks, court administrators, and standing masters intentionally reaching out to judicial districts and tribal courts throughout the state.
2. They held focus group meetings in Billings, Great Falls, Kalispell, and Missoula for parents and professionals to talk about what they experienced as problems and remedies in the GAL system.
3. They hosted a conference at the University of Montana at which they facilitated discussion groups with Guardians ad Litem, children's attorneys, and parents, about the issues they faced in this system and the solutions each group saw.
4. They called each judicial district in Montana to find out how Guardians ad Litem are used or not used, and what issues surfaced from the perspective of court clerks.
5. They conducted an on-line survey that was completed by Guardians ad Litem, parents and mental health professionals. A total of 67 individuals responded representing 36 of the 56 counties in Montana.
6. Finally, they conducted interviews with parents and professionals who wanted to tell their story in the hopes of creating change by offering you testimony.

Over the last two years I estimate that we have heard from or spoken to well over 300 individuals whose lives directly intersect Guardians ad Litem.

Our findings are easy to report. There was **not one**—mental health professional, parent, Guardian ad Litem, standing master or attorney who felt that the system, as currently conceived, worked well to provide quality intervention to children in families where a GAL was needed.

We heard Montanans from around the state consistently say there was a dire need for training, supervision, professional guidelines and support for Guardians ad Litem. These changes would not only help Guardians do their job and do their job effectively, but would also substantially

reduce the harm that is unintentionally inflicted on vulnerable children—the fall out of which will be felt by families and tax payers for generations to come.

I urge your support of HB 281. I urge you to understand that this is not a problem located in one judicial district or a problem that only affects a limited segment of your constituency. This is a statewide Montana issue and the remedy is in your hands. Thank you.

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